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As Others See It

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Shelter as a pathway to housing

By Phil Kramer

Anyone who doubts shelter is a pathway to housing should meet Gary.

He had been out of work for nine years due to an auto-immune illness. Although he regained his health, he was homeless and began staying at the Paul Lee Loft emergency shelter at the Homeless Services Center.

"I needed a leg up", he told us. "The loft gave me food, shelter and a place to shower."

Gary was referred to the Rapid Re-Housing Program, which helped him find employment and housing. He's working full-time for a locksmith and lives in an apartment with his teenage son. His bills are paid, there is food in his refrigerator and this summer he was the official grill master for his son's Little League team.

Gary's story is similar to over 160 people in 2017 whose living situations were improved by the Homeless Services Center connecting them with resources that created a pathway to stable housing. Homelessness is a regional, countywide issue that requires bold government and service sector collaboration. Emergency shelters, navigation centers and day centers can be the means to end someone's homelessness by providing resources to connect them with benefits, supportive services and pathways to housing. With that in mind, we wholeheartedly support the current city and county conversations taking place to establish a day center.

The community will seem to be there - sharing a common goal to have fewer individuals and families experiencing homelessness in Santa Cruz County - and the city and county are working together. Now we just need to work with the community to find the best location for building a new shelter and day center and to fund the services that will make it a success in reducing homelessness.

I wish we didn't need another emergency shelter or day center, but we simply do. According to the 2017 Santa Cruz County Homeless Census and Survey, 2,249 people are homeless, with 80 percent unsheltered, which is one of the highest

unsheltered rates in the country. Even simply relative to our county's total population, we have many fewer emergency shelter beds than most jurisdictions in the U.S.

There are a number of helpful stopgap measures underway, but we need better long-term solutions. The seasonal Winter Shelter and Warming Center serve people during the coldest part of the year, but we need more emergency beds countywide throughout the year. The Santa Cruz Police Department's decision not to enforce the city's camping ban in order to allow people to sleep safely at night is wise. But we know the current encampment in San Lorenzo Park is not a sustainable solution. It is not good for the park and the San Lorenzo River, and it is not designed to end homelessness for the people gathered there.

Finding housing is hard but possible. I'm often asked how the 180/2020 campaign, directed by the Homeless Services Center, has housed 640 people during the past five years in a real estate market defined by very low vacancy rates and exceptionally high housing costs. We've done it working collaboratively with the Housing Authority, city and county agencies, multiple nonprofit partners and a dedicated team of housing navigators and case managers to develop relationships with landlords and support clients in their new housing.

As a community we have made some strides to address homelessness over the past few years but we have not added much shelter capacity nor places for people to be and get services during the day. These things are not easy to create - they take a site, capital funding and ongoing operations to run them well and achieve positive outcomes.

The need is urgent. Homeless Services Center stands ready to support the city and county as best we can, sharing our best practices and commitment to realizing a vision that homelessness in Santa Cruz County should be rare, brief and non-recurring.

Phil Kramer is executive director at Homeless Services Center